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WASHINGTON STAR (GREEN LINE)
1 MAY 1980

National and Foreign Report

Nominee for State Dept. Post Refuses to Link AWACS Sale, Saudi Concessions

Senators Criticize Deal on Radar Craft

By Robert Hornig
Washington Star Staff Writer

The nominee for a high State Department post yesterday told Congress the administration expects no policy concessions from Saudi Arabia in exchange for the contemplated sale of AWACS advanced radar aircraft and other military equipment to the oil kingdom.

"It is not reasonable to expect that in the context of this transaction (the Saudis) will change policies they consider fundamental," Nicholas A. Veliotis, the nominee for assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern and South Asian affairs, told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee at his confirmation hearing.

Veliotis' statement came as several senators, adamantly opposed to the sale, demanded to know what the United States would get in return from the Saudis.

The proposed arms sale has met with heated opposition on Capitol Hill. Senate Majority Leader Howard Baker has hinted that the only way it can get congressional approval is for the Saudis to make some concessions in their policies toward Israel and Palestinian terrorism.

But Veliotis' testimony indicated that none would be forthcoming.

"There's no quid pro quo?" asked Sen. Joseph Biden, D-Del.

"Not in regard to the sale. The sale will really change nothing..." Veliotis replied.

While the Middle Eastern expert

will shape policy toward a region stretching from Morocco through Bangladesh, the AWACS sale and U.S.-Saudi relations were the only questions the committee put to him.

Specifically, the senators wanted to know if the Saudis were prepared to change their opposition to the Camp David peace process, whether they would be willing to stop funding the Palestine Liberation Organization, whether they would permit a U.S. base on its territory and whether they would stop calling for a holy war against Israel.

Sen. Rudy Boschwitz, R-Minn., the chairman of the Near East subcommittee, told Veliotis, "They hold the key and yet they don't want to turn it."

Veliotis' appearance provided the committee its first opportunity to vent its anger toward the arms package, and it did so in a bipartisan manner.

"I share the skepticism (with Boschwitz) with that proposal and my skepticism is shared by many senators," Sen. Claiborne Pell, D-R.I., told Veliotis.

Besides the apparent anger over a lack of concessions, the senators wanted to know why the Saudis need the AWACS and suggested that the real reason was to use them against Israel.

"I guess you would call it national pride, national interest," Veliotis gave as the reason. But he denied that the Saudi intention was to use the aircraft against Israel.

"We are not making a unilateral gesture or doing a favor for Saudi Arabia. It is also in our own security interest," Veliotis said.

He added that the arms package —

whose presentation to Congress has been delayed until at least July because of stiff congressional opposition — must be viewed "in the context of the administration's broader objectives... It will enable the Saudis to have a more credible capability to defend against any threats to their oil fields."

Other questions were directed to the internal stability of Saudi Arabia. Sen. William Pressler, R-S.D., declared: "We're concerned that the government of Saudi Arabia is stable and the position of the royal family is secure."

Pressler said much of his concern stems from a takeover of the Grand Mosque in Mecca by fanatics two years ago.

Both Pressler and Biden cited an alleged CIA report and statements by former CIA Director Stansfield Turner that the royal family faces the threat of toppling by dissidents.

"I do not believe Saudi Arabia is an unstable country," Veliotis stated.